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AUTHOR Schnell, Jim
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ABSTRACT

A higher education faculty member compares the role of the teacher in small liberal arts colleges and large public universities through analysis of his experiences at both types of institution. The paper specifically focuses on how institutional size and mission affects the role of the teacher. Discussion of the differences between the large research university and small liberal arts college environments considers effects of institution size, institutional focus and ownership. The institutions compared were the University of Cincinnati (Ohio) with 36,000 students and Ohio Dominican College (ODC) with 1,200 students. At the smaller school departmental discussion and decision making was easier, the college community was more cohesive, ethical concerns received more attention, and administration was more accessible. The smaller institution also encouraged a greater general awareness of the institution's mission statement and an application of that mission to curricular continuity. A greater sense of institutional ownership by faculty was also found at the smaller school, with teachers in the large university more likely to feel like academic sub-contractors versus the small college teachers' sense of being all-around role models and essential parts of the institution. (JB)

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COMPARING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES AND LARGE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Jim Schnell
Associate Professor
Department of Fine and Communication Arts
Ohio Dominican College
614-251-4581

Mailing address: 136 Shepard Street
Gahanna, Ohio 43230

HE 025 810

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COMPARING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES AND LARGE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

This paper will describe the role transition experienced by the author when he moved to a small liberal arts college after spending five years at a large research university (and the prior five years at two other state universities). Such considerations will include the effects of size, community, cohesiveness, curricular continuity, financial constraints, quality of academic life, collegiality, proximity, religious mission and related concerns. Awareness gained from this inquiry provides understanding of how institution size and mission affects the role of the teacher.

A brief chronological review of the author's academic training and experience will provide insight into the foundation of his perspective. He graduated from a small liberal arts college (Capital University) in Columbus, Ohio, completed his M.A. at the State University of New York/Plattsburgh, and earned the Ph.D. from Ohio University. After leaving Ohio University, where he taught four years (three years as a graduate teaching associate), he spent one year as a visiting assistant professor at Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) and then spent five years as an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati. A combination of personal and professional reasons resulted in his relocating to Columbus, Ohio (his hometown) and accepting a position at Ohio Dominican College.

Ohio Dominican College is a small liberal arts college

(roughly 1,200 students) operated by the Dominican Sisters of the Catholic Church. The mission statement of the college is based on the Dominican motto: "to contemplate truth and to share with others the fruits of this contemplation." The common core curriculum requires all students to complete two basic courses in the Humanities and two additional "thematics courses" that deal with topics related to the Humanities subject area.

The author came to Ohio Dominican College from the University of Cincinnati. The University of Cincinnati is a large comprehensive research university (roughly 36,000 students attend the main and branch campuses). The main campus is second in size in Ohio only to Ohio State University. The University of Cincinnati is owned and operated by the state of Ohio and is comprised of 11 separate colleges (each college has individual curriculum requirements). The transition from large research university to small liberal arts college was made easier because the author had attended a small liberal arts college as an undergraduate.

Discussion of differences between the large research university and small liberal arts college environments will focus on three primary areas: 1) institution size, 2) institution focus, and 3) institution ownership. These three areas are interrelated and affect the role of the teacher.

Institution size is the most concrete area. The physical size of the large university and proportionate

number of students, faculty, administrators and staff evidences a striking contrast with the small liberal arts college.

This factor creates a number of sub-factors that affect the role of the teacher. The author came to a department comprised of two full-time faculty from a department comprised of 18 full-time faculty. Thus, discussions about curriculum and classroom procedures occur much easier with the smaller department.

The smaller student body provides a framework for a more cohesive college community. Students know each other and the faculty. The sense of familiarity benefits the classroom and the social atmosphere of the campus. Classroom cohesiveness rarely needs to be built, it can generally be assumed. This enhances student responsibility for their behavior (attendance, participation, quality of work, and dedication to group membership during group assignments). Similarly, ethical concerns receive more attention because of the size (and resulting familiarity) and the religious nature of the college.

Proximity, as a consideration, is commensurate with student body size. Classes at Ohio Dominican College are taught primarily in three main buildings (one of which houses the main administrative offices and dining hall). This perpetuates considerable interaction (in and out of the classroom) among students with different academic majors. Thus, the smaller (but diverse) student body means a typical

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classroom will be comprised of students with varied backgrounds and academic interests. The heterogeneity of such a classroom does not suffer from homogeneous familiarity, or "academic blindspots", frequently found in classes comprised of students majoring in the same subject area.

A benefit of teaching at a smaller institution (for the author) is being able to consistently teach in the same classroom. This generally leads to faculty members taking ownership for the classrooms they teach in. Classrooms are rarely littered and vandalism is very rare. When the author taught at the University of Cincinnati, furniture in some classrooms had to be chained to the wall to discourage theft.

One might think a small college population would lack diversity. The extent of academic diversity is limited compared to large research universities (because of faculty size) but student body ethnic and racial diversity is similar to that of larger universities. The percentage of minority and international students parallels that of Ohio State University (which boasts over 50,000 students). Fortunately, the aforementioned variables of cohesiveness, size, proximity, and familiarity create an environment that encourages open exchange of ideas among culturally different students in the classroom. Cross-cultural relations are far less strained than what the author experienced at larger universities. Thus, teaching style can build on this cross-cultural appreciation.

The Chronicle of Higher Education carries periodic reports about the increase of race related violence on university campuses in the U.S. The following is a purely subjective observation but it can be used as an indicator. In his three years of teaching at Ohio Dominican College the author has never known of an act of violence at the college that was racially motivated, nor has he ever heard a racial slur directed to or about anyone. This cross-cultural tolerance allows for more genuine classroom discussion regarding cross-cultural differences.

Institution focus is affected by a number of variables. The mission statement of the institution can be such a variable. The author has been a faculty member at three large state universities. He never saw an emphasis on university mission statements (if they existed) at these institutions. Ohio Dominican College frequently refers to it's mission statement in it's literature and the mission statement is clearly recognized as a referent in curriculum development and campus governance.

Related to the Ohio Dominican mission statement is it's emphasis on the Humanities. As noted earlier, all students take two basic courses in the Humanities curriculum. These two courses trace the development of western civilization from the Greeks to present. The Humanities Faculty is comprised of faculty from various academic departments within the college. Since all students take these courses, faculty can prepare lectures with the assurance students have studied

(or are currently studying) primary individuals who have affected the development of western thought. This factor is enhanced because the Humanities Faculty is relatively small and there is considerable continuity among curricular objectives stressed. This continuity is paralleled in the common core course requirements all students must complete.

Curricular continuity at the University of Cincinnati is far more difficult because of the size of the institution. The university is comprised of 11 separate colleges, each with it's own curricular emphasis. The colleges are linked (students can take courses outside of the college of the major) but each college has a considerable degree of autonomy.

Institutional focus is also affected strongly by the religious orientation of Ohio Dominican College. Meetings frequently begin with prayer and some classes begin with prayer. Student organizations and the campus atmosphere reflect a Catholic emphasis. Artwork and artifacts clearly evidence Christian beliefs (i.e. some classrooms have crucifixes above the chalkboards). Religious emphasis in public universities is very rare. The author speculates such emphasis is rare because of the separation of church and state.

Ohio Dominican College is tuition driven. The college is supported primarily through tuition dollars. This affects the organizational culture as we are all aware we cannot afford to be wasteful. Unproductive employees are rare. The

author's experience in the state system exposed him to a more liberal fiscal approach. State universities are supported primarily by the state. As with any public bureaucracy, unproductive employees and unproductive programs can be more easily sheltered from scrutiny. In private colleges, wasted financial resources equates to (among other things) smaller financial reserves, which equates to smaller salary increases. Waste affects all employees.

There are negative factors that indirectly affect teaching style when one moves from a large research university to a small liberal arts college. Such factors generally include smaller salaries and fewer benefits for faculty, less academic diversity among faculty (due to smaller size), and less monetary support for research and convention travel. One often hears nobody enters a career in education to get rich. This is especially true in the private college sector. The Chronicle of Higher Education periodically publishes data that substantiates this perspective. The sense of purpose and quality of life index can counter balance this lack of economic remuneration however.

Another consideration affecting institutional focus is the concern with teaching and research. Smaller colleges generally have more concern with quality teaching and less concern with research. Subsequently there is less expectation of faculty research. Large public universities generally value research over teaching. Subsequently there

is greater expectation of faculty research.

Institution ownership is the third area that was highlighted earlier as a primary category for consideration. Institution ownership, in this case, deals with how faculty relate to the institution (rather than who literally "owns" the physical property). The author has seen examples of faculty ownership at private colleges and public universities but feels faculty ownership is much stronger in private colleges.

Public universities are more likely to have unionized faculties. Thus, rights/responsibilities are directly outlined. Private colleges are less likely to have unionized faculties. Secondary responsibilities are generally implied. Faculty are motivated more by "good will" (good of the order) than by "legal" responsibilities. Unions obviously have strong points but the author feels faculty unions inhibit trust and genuine concern.

As one of two members of the communication arts faculty, the author teaches a wide range of courses in the communication arts curriculum. He taught far fewer courses while teaching in the state system. He was more of a "specialist" in fewer areas than a generalist in many areas. As a small college faculty member he is less inclined to say "I don't do windows".

A result of this type of ownership in the small college is that the faculty member is less an "affiliate" of the institution. He/she <u>is</u> the institution. The faculty member

in the large public institution can be more of an academic subcontractor, whereas the small college faculty member can be more of an all-around role model. The author has a picture of each class he has taught at Ohio Dominican.

An overall benefit of the small college is the stronger sense of community. During his years in the state system the author never met a university president. He doesn't fault the universities for this. Institution size simply does not promote such interaction. At Ohio Dominican however, the author and other faculty/staff informally eat lunch with the president and other administrators on a regular basis.

Senior administrators in large public universities can seem distant and out of touch with faculty concerns. Again, institution size almost guarantees this situation. However, informally eating together and similar informal activities in small colleges help perpetuate a "trickle down" of trust. The author is reminded of one evening when a university president spent a night in a dormitory to evidence his empathy/understanding with students. There was an upbeat story about it in the newspaper the following day. The president of Ohio Dominican is a Dominican Sister. She lives in a dormitory room (year round).

This paper is not intended to be a conclusive "last word" on the comparison between small liberal arts colleges and large public universities. The author intends this to be one person's perspective on how institution size,

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institutional focus, and institutional ownership affect the role of the teacher. His interaction with colleagues from both types of institutions support the positions stated but there are obviously going to be exceptions. Still, even in general terms, the aforementioned effects are thought provoking.